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ABSTRACT

A high priority area for behavioral community psychologists involves working to strengthen informal support systems within communities. A collaborative effort between a community group and academic based psychologists focusses on a community problem--dog litter in an urban area. An original demonstration project was used to influence the political process (i.e., a dog ordinance), and served as an entry vehicle for working with the community group. Over a nine-month period, community members identified the target issue and supplied personnel to mount the "dog interventions." The University group provided guidance, support and expertise in planning and evaluating the intervention. In introducing evaluation, community members needed to be apprised of potential benefits in evaluating the project and the importance of standardized procedures, comprehensive training sessions and supervision. Potential advantages and disadvantages in collaborating with community groups are discussed. (Author)

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Behavioral Consultation to Community
Self-Help Organizations

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Behavioral Consultation to Community

Self-Help Organizations

Behavioral therapists have, for the most part, adopted a traditional style of service delivery, with the majority of behavioral interventions taking a passive stance, utilizing a one-to-one service delivery model, and targeting programs towards individuals with identified problems (Nietzel, Winett, MacDonald & Davidson, 1977). In contrast, a community mental health approach strives to (a) extend the reach of services through consultation and the use of paraprofessionals, (b) actively intervene with those most amenable to change (e.g., during developmental transitions and early childhood), and (c) modify environmental irritants predisposing toward maldevelopment (Jason, 1977).

Adopting a community style of service delivery, behavioral community psychologists might work to strengthen through consultation both formal and informal support systems within communities. Support systems represent an intertwined matrix of networks, which include political groups, self-help organizations, block clubs, natural helpers, conservation groups, voluntary associations, etc. (Perlman, 1976). Their stability and viability have an important impact upon the health, well-being, and sense of identity and meaning of community residents (Caplan, 1974; Sarason, 1974). Harnessing, and working with, the talent and resources already existing within communities represents a high priority need.

Community groups and psychologists, for example, might work together in order to ameliorate the ubiquitous dog litter problem in urban areas. Accumulations of dog waste represent a potential health hazard (Cruickshank, Standard & Russell, 1976; Moffet, 1975) and detract from the overall esthetic quality

of life in a community.

Interventions to Decrease Dog Litter

A group of investigators at DePaul University have documented the extent of dog droppings in one urban area and evaluated prospective strategies for alleviating the "dog nuisance" problem (Jason, Zolik, & Matese, in press). During a seven day baseline period, approximately 20 pounds of dog droppings were deposited in the target observed area and only 5% of owners picked up after their dogs. Posting of signs to encourage owners to pick up did not lead to any improvements. When owners were instructed on how to use a plastic bag to pick up and given a demonstration, over 80% picked up after their dogs. Following the last intervention phase, the study was presented at City Hall in support of an ordinance requiring all dog owners to carry some type of pooper scooper when walking dogs. The testimony was later presented on television and radio stations, as well as several newspapers in Chicago. A short time later, the proposed ordinance was passed by the City Council. Several citizen groups within the Chicago area subsequently contacted the authors for advice in setting up their own bag intervention programs.

The next studies involved a nine month collaborative relationship between an academic-based research team and one of the community groups which expressed interest in ameliorating the dog litter problem in its neighborhood. The community group formed to ameliorate a health and esthetic problem; namely, the excessive accumulation of dog feces deposited on sidewalks and lawns. The community group identified the target problem and contributed resources and peoplepower for the mounted interventions, with the community psychologists providing training in relevant behavioral technologies and evaluating the interventions' efficacy.

I attended four planning meetings where strategies and plans for the dog intervention were discussed. Throughout these meetings, I helped the members devise their intervention and build in an evaluation component. During the first meeting, the committee members decided to identify the streets in their community with the greatest accumulation of dog litter. Each member surveyed designated streets and two connected streets with the highest density were selected for the intervention. The committee members picked a Saturday in early October to implement the intervention. Committee members approached dog owners and said "Hi, we're from Southeast Lakeview Neighbors. Are you aware of the new ordinance about carrying a receptacle to clean up after your dog?" Following an answer, the worker replied, "Here is a copy of the new ordinance. Would you like some newspaper or a plastic bag in case you don't have anything with you?" If the bag was taken or the owner had their own, the worker said, "Thanks for keeping the streets clean." If the bag was refused, the worker said, "We just want everyone to be aware of the new ordinance so we can keep our neighborhood clean."

The intervention was relatively successful on the day bags were given out; only 18% refused to accept a bag and 67% picked up after their dogs. For the first few days after the intervention, rates of dog litter declined by about 2 pounds daily; however, rates subsequently increased (Jason, Note 1). Data from the study was used in planning and implementing a subsequent intervention, lasting a longer period of time.

Three and one-half months following the first intervention, we met with the community group to plan a more extended intervention. At that meeting, the intervention, script, and design of the study were agreed upon (Jason, Zolik, & Matese, Note 2). The DePaul research team agreed to evaluate the intervention

whereas the community residents supplied the manpower to implement the second project. Employing an ABAB design, dogs' and owners' behavior were observed for eight-hour periods during baseline phases. During treatment phases, owners were again approached with a script somewhat similar to the one above. With implementation of the treatment phase, pick-up behavior increased from 0% to 87%. One month following the second intervention phase, droppings in the target area had been decreased by 88%. In addition, there was an 80% decrease in the overall community rates (i.e., when the number of defecations in a four by two block area before the study were compared to the count one month following the end of the second study). This study demonstrated the superiority of a more extended intervention in bringing about decreases in neighborhood dog litter.

Issues in Introducing Evaluation to Community Based Groups

In introducing evaluation into community consultation projects, several issues need to be addressed. For example, community members need to be apprised of the benefits stemming from the evaluation process, the importance of standardized procedures, the need for comprehensive training sessions, and the importance of supervision in insuring adequate implementation of intervention procedures. Each of these issues will be delineated below.

In order to launch a successful evaluation effort, behavioral community psychologists need to apprise community members of the benefits stemming from evaluation. If the residents neither see the relevance nor importance of evaluation, efforts to introduce research will be vitiated. In the aforementioned interventions, community members were intimately involved in the evaluation effort at an early point in order to enable them to perceive the benefits

accruing from research. For example, during the first few weeks community members canvassed streets in their community to determine the site of the greatest waste offenses, and then used this data to specify target areas for the actual intervention. Residents also observed how data was instrumental in shaping the form and nature of the second community intervention. The initial project failed to conduce towards long-term gains, as assessed by dog litter removed from the street each morning. This finding of lack of maintenance served as the stimulus for planning the second, more extended intervention. Finally, empirical data was shown to be an effective tool in educating the public to the hazards and seriousness of the dog litter problem. The first study's data had been used at City Hall and in the Chicago press to mobilize support for a new dog ordinance. The community intervention also received local press coverage, which served to educate the public as to the extent of the dog "nuisances," and to illustrate efforts a community could embrace in militating against an inveterate community sore spot.

Another issue central to the success of introducing evaluation concerns employing standardized procedures. Unless intervention agents implement procedures in prescribed manners, the identification of key, active intervention components is obfuscated. During training sessions, considerable time was devoted to discussing and role playing the script employed when confronting dog owners. In addition to insuring methodological rigor for identifying factors accounting for change, precise and predetermined scripts were useful for both the shy, nonassertive residents as well as the more rabid, overzealous participants. The script and practice sessions instilled confidence in the quieter members by providing them with an opportunity to strengthen their assertive behaviors and by giving them a set dialogue to follow when confronting owners. On the

other hand, several community members who tended to display extremely hostile and pugnacious tendencies moderated their belligerent styles when given the standard script, and thus the likelihood of precipitating a full-scale altercation was considerably reduced.

In order to prepare the community residents for the actual intervention, comprehensive training sessions were essential. While many ways exist for establishing target skills, the central issue is insuring that participants feel confident about implementing procedures and follow intervention directions carefully. Several sessions were devoted to establishing criterion behavior in community residents. Teaching techniques employed included modeling, role playing, discussions, and feedback from community members. Training sessions not only guaranteed acquisition of requisite skills, but also engendered a positive group spirit among the members of the community group. By working toward a collective goal, members felt a greater affinity towards each other, and this probably enhanced the psychological sense of community for group members.

A final issue pertaining to the evaluation process concerns carefully supervising all aspects of the implemented project. All community residents were provided a typed script, necessary materials, and a scoring sheet to record dog owners' reactions to their approach. In addition, a DePaul undergraduate independently recorded interactions and observed whether intervention procedures were accurately performed. The observers reported that the procedures were carefully followed and high interrater reliability for the scoring system was obtained.

Advantages and Disadvantages in Collaborative Ventures

Potential advantages in consulting with community groups include: (a) engendering among laypersons a more positive public image of accessible resources

within universities and of the beneficial capabilities of behavior modification techniques; (b) utilizing community input for identification of urgent issues needing amelioration; and (c) precipitating the mobilization of forces which might exert long-term positive influences on the rectification of community problems. Difficulties in mounting such programs include: (a) miscommunications due to failures in adequately understanding the culture, history, and traditions of the members of particular communities; and (b) resistance on the part of community residents who might feel dominated by academicians/scientists demanding excessive quantification and rigor. Each of these issues will be discussed below.

One principal advantage in collaboration is providing community groups a greater appreciation of extant technology and expertise residing within the universities. Because of my nine-month association with Southeast Lakeview Neighbors, I was asked to consult on two other community projects. One involved constructing a questionnaire to evaluate a conference, the National Association of Neighborhoods. The other involved critiquing a Chicago City Council study on the police beat patrol for an independent Chicago Alderman. By actively participating (i.e., literally getting my hands dirty) on the resolution of "real life" community problems, I was perceived as an academic type, willing to sensitively apply evaluation skills to other community issues.

An additional benefit concerned a more positive reception for behavioral techniques. Undoubtedly, communities are confronted with myriad, specifiable difficulties which are amenable to behavior modification. The issue of prompting dog owners to pick up dog waste is a patent example. Community residents could easily observe the objectionable problem, could identify specific tactics for ameliorating the nuisance, and could quickly recognize the effectiveness of intervention strategies. Behavior modification was appreciated as a useful tool for reducing dog litter and evaluating program efficacy.

Community groups are one of the best sources for identification of pressing neighborhood issues requiring attention. When armchair psychologists speculate on needed interventions, without any input or contact with citizen groups, they unwittingly impose their own idiosyncratic solutions which might be inappropriate or harmful to the fabric and culture of a community. Allowing community groups to guide psychologists in the prioritization of urgent needs ultimately enables a greater accountability to community residents, decreases a proclivity towards devoting inordinate amounts of time on trivial problems having no relation to the espoused needs of the community, and consequently increases the probability that resident needs are met and community psychologists are positively perceived.

Finally, intimately involving community groups in the planning and implementation of neighborhood projects might generate requisite interest, motivation and behavioral patterns to continue active intervention components following termination of the formal program. Maintenance of change might best be attained by teaching natural change agents requisite skills, who then might continue intervening after the intervention ends. In the dog study, in order to produce long-term change, residents will need to continue exerting pressure on dog owners to pick up after their dogs. By providing opportunities for community members to practice assertive skills in confronting their neighbors, the probability of continuation of such behaviors following the project's termination is increased. Some support for these notions is provided by the finding that one month follow-up data indicated that gains brought about during the intervention did not erode.

In collaborating with community groups, difficulties might be encountered if the culture and traditions of community members are ignored, transgressed or violated. For example, failures might be inevitable if academics denigrate the sometimes chaotic process by which decisions are made, undermine the authority

of identified leaders in order to exert more influence in policy decisions, or impose alien techniques considered incompatible with the norms and values of community members. A concerted effort was made to avoid these difficulties by spending several sessions getting to know the community members and becoming familiar with their traditions, values and culture. It was critical to be intimately familiar with the stated and actual objectives of the ad hoc community group, the manner by which decisions were made, the dissensions and factions within the groups, as well as historical variables, the past attempts to ameliorate the target problem and the reasons for the creation of the present group. Aware of these historical events, cognizant of certain process issues, and familiar with traditions of decision making in the community, the likelihood of colliding with or damaging community values was diminished.

Another prospective difficulty in working with community groups pertains to citizen concerns that investigators will dominate and control the intervention by insisting on excessive rigor in quantifying procedures and program evaluation. The interventions were created by the community; my role was to evaluate the procedures. Methodologically, the first intervention would have been more potent if a reversal or multiple baseline design or a more extended intervention had been employed. The community group, however, was given the right to select a design which they considered to be practical and efficacious. By supporting their decision, the community members did not feel controlled by the needs of an investigator. When the erosion of gains was documented in the first community intervention, the rationale and need for a more extended intervention was openly accepted, thus providing an opportunity for employing a more rigorous design in the second intervention.

Conclusion

Although behavioral technology was wedded to a traditional style of

service delivery in the 1950's and '60's, in the present decade attempts have been made to utilize behavioral principles in a community paradigm (Nietzel, Winett, MacDonald, & Davidson, 1977). Behavioral community psychologists began assuming an active approach in combatting mental health problems by extending the reach of services (via paraprofessionals and consultations), intervening during the most propitious times (during transitions and early childhood), and modifying environmental influences on development (Jason, 1977).

An emerging theme in the community literature concerns recognizing and working with support systems within communities (Caplan, 1974). To the extent a community has a rich network of supports, the capacity to cope with environmental irritants and psychological trauma is enhanced. The competent community has the requisite support systems and internal mechanisms to adequately identify and solve pressing community issues (Iscoe, 1974). Behavioral community psychologists might contribute to enhancing a community's competence by working with informal and formal support systems, to help conceptualize issues, formulate interventions, and evaluate the efficacy of problem solving efforts.

The dog intervention studies reported herein illustrate how behavioral technology can be successfully utilized by a community group. The original demonstration project was used to influence the political process (i.e., a dog ordinance), and served as an entry vehicle for a community group. Community residents were chagrined over intolerable levels of accumulated dog litter on their sidewalks and lawns. Over the course of nine months, the community group identified the issue to be dealt with and supplied the personnel to mount the two "dog interventions"; the university-based research group provided guidance, support and expertise in planning and evaluating the interventions. Even though the first planned intervention succeeded in reducing dog litter for only a few days, the community members still appreciated the help from the research group

and remained committed to implementing another intervention.¹ The subsequent, more extended intervention did bring about a considerable decrease in dog litter and gains were maintained at a one month follow-up period.

In introducing evaluation into community collaborative projects several issues were discussed, including apprising members of the benefits stemming from the evaluation process, the importance of standardized procedures, and the need for comprehensive training and supervision. Members of the Lakeview community group were remarkably receptive to all evaluation procedures utilized. In part, this positive set might have been facilitated by the relevancy and usefulness of data collected in the first study which received considerable media exposure in highlighting the seriousness of the dog litter problem in Chicago. In addition, the community members believed that quantification of procedures and benefits accrued through the present interventions could provide necessary feedback as to the project's efficacy, and be used by other community groups confronted with similar difficulties.

Advantages and difficulties in consulting with community groups were delineated. The difficulties were avoided by devoting several sessions to becoming familiar with the traditions and values of the community and university, and utilizing input from community members in devising intervention procedures and evaluation methodologies. True collaborative efforts between community groups and academically based research teams need a mutual base of respect and appreciation. Care must be exercised so that an investigator's need for pristine experimental designs do not vitiate the group spirit, autonomy and natural leadership of community groups. While progress toward ameliorating an identified target problem should be given a high priority, just as important is helping the community groups achieve self-defined goals, support the authority of natural leaders, and strengthen culturally sanctioned vehicles for intervention. In

this way, an effort has been initiated toward strengthening the fabric of a community, improving the capability for solving problems, and enhancing the psychological sense of community.

Reference Notes

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Footnote

¹The two leaders of the ad-hoc community group sent a letter to the principal investigator following the end of the first intervention which said:

We have indeed been fortunate to have your expert guidance and help on our recent Pick Up Poop Project. Looking back we wonder if we would really have had the nerve to go through with this project if you had not made yourself so readily available at all times. Thank you for your commitment of time and energy.

Even though the results have not been encouraging we feel the morale of the committee is still high. Next spring we would like to continue the project so we'll keep in touch.